

Copyright

by

Adam Michael Boley

2016

**The Report Committee for Adam Michael Boley
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

sometimes I miss

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Sarah Canright

Anna Collette

sometimes I miss

by

Adam Michael Boley, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

To the ducks.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Anna Collette for seeing me through these past three years and always being quick with a joke to put me in my place. I am also thankful to Sarah Canright for all her generosity. I also want to thank Teresa Hubbard, Dan Southerland, and Bogdan Perzynski for all their feedback. And to my peers, I love you all.

Abstract

sometimes I miss

Adam M. Boley M.F.A

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Sarah Canright

This Master's Report discusses the various bodies of work I have produced throughout my graduate career. As an artist, I am interested in my relationship to masculinity, tradition, anticipation, landscapes and animals.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	viii
Text.....	1
Bibliography	12

List of Figures

Figure 1: Great Grandma Bethke	2
Figure 2: powerlines	3
Figure 3: shallow water.....	4
Figure 4: pintail drake, pintail hen	6
Figure 5: fishing pole bouquet	7
Figure 6: ducks drop like rain	8
Figure 7: stick and poke shotgun	9
Figure 8: sometimes I miss	10
Figure 9: video still from December 19 th , 2015	15
Figure 10: video still from December 19 th , 2015	16
Figure 11: video still from December 19 th , 2015	17

The Bethke Place

“The place is important; The time is summer. It’s any summer, but the place is home and the people here are my family.” - Sally Mann

Early in my photographic practice, it became clear to me that I was interested in my own narrative and some of the traditions that are embedded in the notions of rural Texas. I find the places beautiful, the lore meaningful and often times the particular aesthetics of a scene was the original motivation for taking a photograph. I want people to be seduced into looking at my work. As I moved through my graduate study, my projects varied but these themes remained constant.

The project I continued working on upon arrival at the University of Texas was *The Bethke Place*. The work was an attempt to lovingly document the place where I grew up, one hundred and fifty acres of land that has been in my family for over a century. The pictures were inspired by Emmet Gowin’s photographs of his wife’s family farm and Sally Mann’s pictures of her children on their gentleman's farm. Though my early photographs documented my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother (the land’s only inhabitants) I increasingly moved away from portraiture in favor of the land. These pictures contain pieces of my family's history, the present and a time that far precedes it. Located in central Texas, east of the Balcones fault line, the land consists of fertile black soil in the area known as the Blackland Prairie. Much of this terrain was settled by German immigrants who tended small farms producing cotton, corn, and wheat. A large portion of the property was recently sold off and now sits waiting for a developer to build large houses on three acre lots. The land is in an in-between. Much of it still farmed and ranched in a slightly less concerned manner as its market value is no longer agricultural. These

photographs show my personal relationship to the land in this liminal state. Often there is a sense of longing, a want to be in the forever twilight that cannot exist. Beauty tinged with the signs of amelioration and the recognition of what was.



Figure 1: Great Grandma Bethke



Figure 2: power lines

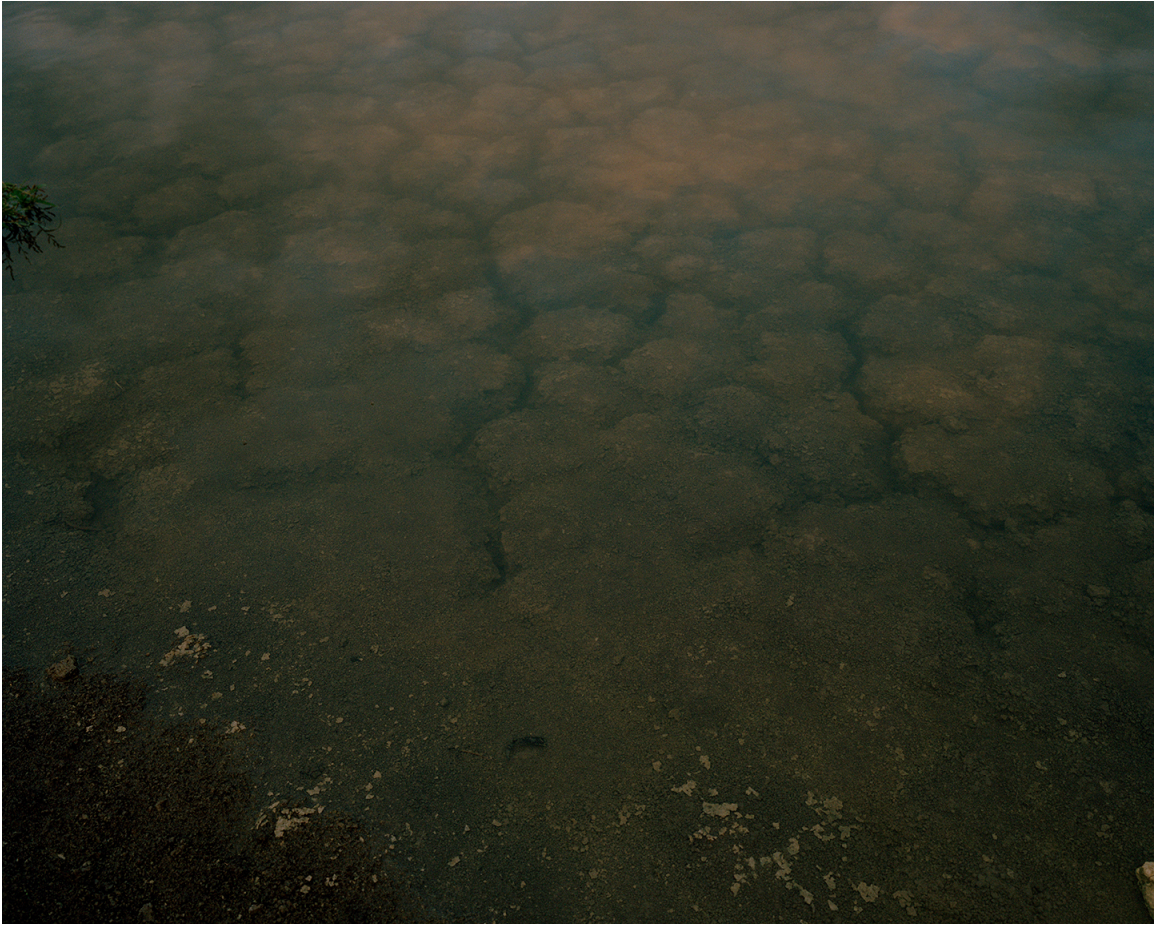


Figure 3: shallow water

I want to live in the woods with you

“Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it.” – Marilynne Robinson

My following project happened abruptly and almost out of necessity. *I want to live in the woods with you* is about the end of a ten year relationship with my partner, someone whom I thought I would spend the rest of my life and eventually move out to a rural area with.

The photographs in this series started with a loss. A loss of a person, an idea, a fiction. They were an exploration of this time and my own confrontation with uncertainty. In my previous work, I was photographing a specific place with clearly defined limits, a place that I knew intrinsically. My new photographs were an earnest attempt to continually reorient myself in a new world without stability. The fidelity and closeness in the subject matter, I believe, mirrors the psychological state of myopic grief in which they were made.

Why did I want the woods? I grew up there. I liked the trope, the idea of self-sufficiency. But in a somehow softer way. The color pallet more light and airy as if in bloom. The wood paneling painted white. The tools of death casting a soft bouquet of a shadow, almost an apology for their own utility. It wasn't the forest I wanted, though, it was the expanse. I always wanted to see the horizon. The only horizon line in this series is fake. A fantasy, just like living in the woods, just like the idea that we could solve our problems if we only delved further into the innards of us and cut the rest of the world off. Cut the feet off – that is what has happened in the photographs, trapped in their vague buoyancy.

In *I want to live in the woods with you*, there were hints at my future work in the culture of duck hunting. Much of the imagery dealt with missed targets either metaphorically or literally. The subject or prey somehow seeming to be captured by the camera a second after the

ideal time. One photograph, for instance, depicted two pintails positioned on the bed of a truck as if sleeping together. The pintails are in fact dead, I shot them myself, twice, in a rather obvious metaphor for the relationship I had been apart of.



Figure 4: pintail drake, pintail hen



Figure 5: fishing pole bouquet



Figure 6: ducks drop like rain



Figure 7: stick and poke shotgun

“Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.” – Susan Sontag

A turning point and transition into my current series came with the photograph *sometimes I miss*. In an attempt to photograph a dove in the same way I would shoot it with a gun (panning the sky, leading the animal), I pressed the button and completely missed the target, leaving nothing but an image of the sky at twilight. In the image there was the literal miss while at the same time the color and emptiness conveyed a feeling of desire and longing that was at the root of the work.



Figure 8: sometimes I miss

A still remains

In my current series, *A still remains*, I utilize video of duck hunts I participate in. Each video in the series differs in their dates and locations but they all employ a single static camera angle. The pieces singularly do different things and rely on the particulars of the morning they were filmed, but all explore notions of tradition, masculinity, anticipation and duration as well as our relationship to animals and landscapes. For this paper I have chosen to write about one entitled December 19th, 2015, a hunt that I participated in with my father and best friend.

Sometimes I miss. This happens a lot. The bird flies by and all I capture is the transitional color of twilight – almost more somber than if I had not missed. The gun frozen forever on the shoulder blade where the wing would have protruded and broken if only I was better.

We're running late again. We are usually always running a little late. Ideally we should be at the pond at least an hour before sunrise to throw out the decoys, setup the blinds and get settled in for the light. None of us are early risers, we do it for something like love, but maybe just pride. Last night we got into the whiskey again. What's the wind direction, what side should we set up on? Boy, I wish it would get cold up North and push more ducks down. At 5 a.m., the darkness is both similar and somehow different than it is at 11 p.m. As we turn on to the long gravel road a Taylor Swift song comes on the radio; Dad and Marc are too engaged in a conversation about the differences between pintails and widgeons to turn it down. I smile and get out to open the gate to our destination. Somewhere cut off from the rest of the world.

you could part the Red Sea with your thumbs, too

you couldn't shoot that one, Adam

December 19th, 2015 from the series *A still remains* is a 17 minute video projected on a large and immersive screen. The piece starts in reverse order; A man (my father) enters the frame and retrieves the duck decoys. At the end of this scene, there is a momentary blackness and the projection returns to the same scene earlier that morning, at sunrise. The water is still. The decoys don't move. A dog pants then whines. The other sounds include ambient noises and the murmurs of male voices. They are mostly inaudible but on occasion one can understand a word or a phrase. About midway through the video, ducks enter the frame at which point six shots are taken and three birds fall. A dog enters from the left, commanded by a male voice and retrieves the birds. The scene quickly returns to the stillness that preceded it, the light still subtly changing. Every now and then the hunters belt out loud chatter resembling the quack of a duck. At some point, the projection returns to a quiet stillness and eventually the image goes to black.

The reversing of the narrative is an attempt to confuse time and impart a sense of empathy to the character that will eventually be responsible for two dead ducks. The thickness of the mud and instability of the shallow water he enters cause him to stumble and appear much older and more fragile than he is. The fake ducks attached to strings trail behind him tenderly as if they were toddlers following their dad. Hunting is often a tradition in which knowledge is passed down from father to son. In this scene there is a simultaneous projection of my father's aging future and that of my own, passed down from one generation to another.

The second part of the video records the actual hunt. For me, hunting is a way of observing the world similar to the way one does with a camera. I look and make predictions of timing based on the surrounding circumstances. The camera in *December 19th, 2015* is static and positioned at roughly the same vantage point as the hunters. This commitment to the stationary camera imparts a particular duration and sense of anticipation associated with the action being

recorded. This also references my relationship to still photography. I project the video in real time because I am interested in the periods of waiting. This is in direct opposition to the many hunting shows and YouTube videos that often focus solely on the “kill shots.” It is in the waiting that one can focus on beauty of a sunrise and the sad idea that for me to eat meat something must die. When birds finally do enter the frame and three of them are shot, the incredible beauty becomes confusing. Does the action feel like a payoff or a reward for waiting so long? Or, is the immediate feeling one of disgust or uneasiness about the loss of life? These significant questions arise and are where I think the importance of my work lies. The complexity of this particular moment in video still holds my attention even after hundreds of views. I can certainly understand having feelings of regret for the birds or even a disdain for hunters but what about the dog? The dog, for me, always retains my empathy. Though he is just another animal, some of his happiness relies on being able to retrieve those teal that drop out of the air. In the last few minutes of *December 19th, 2015*, there is also an incredible collapse of desire. The dog is clearly still panting ready for the next birds to fall. The men blow their duck calls loudly in an excited attempt to attract a flock of fowl within range of their shotguns. And finally, because I set the camera to auto-exposure, the aperture starts to get smaller so that even though the sun is rising the projection is getting darker. Its desire (the camera) perhaps, to hold on to the dawn just a little longer... just long enough for an unsuspecting group of teal.

Dad: Maybe somebody's hunting behind Andy's house this morning. I think that help us.

Adam: Yep

Marc: Alright, let's get a bird here, where y'all at?

Dad: Hmmph

Dad: Here we go, customers, better tak'em.

Throughout *December 19th, 2015*, the men's voices, as mentioned earlier, are indistinct and almost inaudible. Even though the conversations are muddled, the men participating in them clearly understand each other. The artist Jeff Whetstone's video *On the Use of a Syrinx* of a turkey hunt has been a seminal piece in the way I think about my work. The conversations in his piece, though, is much more audible. Each hunter's voice is clearly heard and the language is vulgar and hypersexual. However, in my piece, the conversations are banal and muted. They mutter, "Where is the wind?" and announce, "Here comes a duck." Although I admire the work of Whetstone appreciate the descriptiveness in his work. It is in these inaudible gaps, though, that I want my work to be less like Whetstone and more like the way John Steinbeck describes the men waiting for rain in chapter one of *The Grapes of Wrath*. "The men sat still-thinking-figuring."



Figure 9: video still from December 19th, 2015



Figure 10: video still from December 19th, 2015



Figure 11: video still from December 19th, 2015

Bibliography

Mann, Sally. *Immediate Family*. New York: Aperture, 1992. Print.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin, 1939. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1977. Print